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# This Art Is For The Birds

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## **This Art Is For The Birds**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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### **Artist Statement**

I use bright colors to portray birds. Typically, the birds are modeled after herons, peacocks, woodpeckers, and roadrunners. I am interested in the curvilinear forms or colorful plumage of these birds. Why birds? I wonder that myself. The rational part of me wants to know why I use bird imagery, while the intuitive side of me likes the fact that it is unknown. I haven't been able to answer that burning question.

In my sculpture, wire connectors, kitchen funnels, electrical tape, caps, marker parts, cleaning bottles, and watering cans are just some of the many plastic items I use. In my painting, irregular patterns and bright, saturated pigments are evident in the compositions. I couple humorous and comical depictions of birds with an attention to design. Although, art making is a serious activity, I believe there is room for humor.

# **This Art is for the Birds**

## **Introduction**

In 2001, in my senior year of college, I began to portray birds. The heron in particular was the bird that I portrayed in most of my work. I never had any particular interest in birds. I knew nothing about them and couldn't even identify the different species. However, I remember looking through an encyclopedia of birds and the heron just stood out to me. Its slender body and elegant pose really struck me. The birds of the heron family were sleek. From my observation, the herons have a human-like presence to them. They strut along like a person assessing everything with their wings tucked behind them, like a person would put his arm behind his back taking everything in. When the herons, in particular the great blue, are in flight they have a graceful appearance as they soar with pride.

Since introducing this animal into my work, I have had this desire to make my art about birds. Since that day as an undergraduate to my enrollment in Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Program, I have depicted birds. I have experimented with a variety of mediums by creating nocturnal paintings, pen and ink drawings, and shadow box collages. Even though I was using the bird motif, I felt that something was missing in my art. Recently my style and aesthetic viewpoint changed when I was introduced to three-dimensional form through a sculpture course.

In this course, I constructed birds out of everyday plastic household objects. These clean, brightly colored plastic sculptures have not only inspired me to work sculpturally but have helped in my paintings. They have become the very models that inspire my current work. What I found missing in my earlier work was a lack of contemporary aesthetic. I didn't want my art to be just about birds. Many artists, like John James Audubon (1785-1851), have already explored birds from a naturalistic or scientific point of view. I found that my plastic bird sculptures have led me to paint imaginatively. Therefore, taking manmade objects and creating representational sculptures as models for paintings has helped me give a view of birds different from previous artists.

I can see an influence on my work from many great artists and movements. The subject matter of my paintings and sculpture are surreal like Joan Miro's (1893-1983) compositions. Bright colors and simple forms also appear in my work. I create gridded fields in my paintings, much like Piet Mondrian's (1872-1944) art. However, my gridded lines are white instead of black. I give the birds a comical and humorous feel, like Roy Lichtenstein's (1923-1997) Pop art. Theodor Geisel (1904-1991) created pure imaginary creatures, which has also inspired my approach to developing images and sculptures. Lastly, Audubon's art did in fact help me because his paintings were great visual references for actual bird forms.

Since blending my sculpture ideas with my painting ideas and connecting to art historical figures and movements, I have found a wealth of ideas and inspirations. As I continue to work, I experiment with different plastic objects and wonder what my end

product will look like. I move parts of the bird around to make the compositions interesting to the viewer. I am eager to indulge in my new discoveries to see where I will end up next.

### **The Sculptural Process**

In sculpture I begin by collecting various plastic objects. Since my work is about birds, I seek out plastics that have curves and contoured forms. Very rarely will I pick plastics that are box shaped and have only straight edges. Anything with an interesting or odd shape I feel could be a potential part of a piece. Bottles, snap lids, kitchen funnels, and wire connectors are just some examples of the plastics I collect. *Purple Faced Grieving Crane* (Appendix, 1) shows evidence of my personal aesthetics in my sculpture.

Some plastics are purchased at stores such as Home Depot, IKEA, U.S. Toy Company, and Dollar Stores, where I make frequent stops for my bird parts. What I can't purchase I seek out through donations from colleagues and friends. I also make random searches in my apartment complex's recycling bin for more potential parts. In my constant search, I begin with what I have, and rely on the belief that I will come across other parts that will bring out the potential in my bird sculptures. While actively seeking plastic parts, I begin a small assembly line of birds varying anywhere from three to five birds and begin to add parts. Using a drill, screws, scissors, and other tools I cut and assemble my birds as I see fit.

Clean, bright, and simple forms are some of the qualities that are present in my plastic sculptures. In selecting parts for my works of art, I choose plastics that have a clean and unused look. When I reuse plastics, I make a conscious effort to clean them so

they look like they are being presented for the first time. This new look appeals to me, because I associate it with good and clean craftsmanship skills, which has always been something I've strived toward in my art. *Big Eyed Mid-Atlantic Waddler* (Appendix, 2 and Appendix, 3) are examples of how I present a new look to my bird sculptures. The overall appearance allows the viewer to see the bird as a form rather than individual elements of disposable plastics - like a new toy that is opened and viewed for the first time.

Another characteristic of my work is a strong sense of design. During the construction process, I place different color funnels and body parts together to get a color scheme that presents unity throughout a piece. Electrical tape, wire connectors, and colored paper clips are all used in consideration for the purpose of design.

### **Painting Process**

In preparation for painting, I purchase variously sized and elongated canvases. I use acrylic paints and prepare my canvases a few at a time, laying in bright colors as a ground. Then, I use masking tape to section off areas where I want hard-edged white lines. These lines act as dividers within the composition for the development of contrasting colored panels. Once the ground is painted, I will use photos of my sculptures as models and draw out my surreal images. After my sketch is completed, I begin to use oil paints.

My paintings have similar characteristics to my sculptures. *Bird in Yellow and Red Painting* (Appendix, 4) shows these similarities, such that the bird is the subject matter, and like the brightly colored sculptures, the canvases are also painted brightly.



Unique to the paintings is their nontraditionally sized canvases. Elongated formats such as 15"x30" and 8"x48", with 1" and 2-½" wooden stretchers, are aspects of my presentation. I choose these sizes because my imagery is elongated and I want to harmonize the subject with the format. Also, the 1" and 2-½" stretchers give the paintings a sculptural presence because they sit out further from the wall than traditional paintings.

### **Artists That Inspire**

#### ***John James Audubon***

Of all the artists that have influenced me, I feel it would be fair to say that John James Audubon's art has had the least influence on my painting style. The reason is that he painted believable environments, or natural habitats, where a certain species of bird might be found. My birds are inspired by actual birds, however they are highly stylized. The color choices made in Audubon's work are naturalistic, whereas my coloration is invented. However, I found Audubon's work to be useful for reference. I used his imagery of birds to help me design and construct my own bird forms. Combining elements of the different species is what helped me construct these unique forms.

#### ***Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss)***

Even though he may not be considered a fine artist, Ted Geisel's personal art in particular has had an influence on my current body of work. Like my fascination with birds, Geisel had an interest in cats. *Alley Cat for a Very Long Alley* (1964), *Surly Cat Being Ejected* (n.d.), and *Wisdom of the Orient Cat* (1964) are works in which Geisel used elongated formats. *Long Necks* (Appendix, 5) is one of my paintings that has the

elongated format. In my art, as well as Geisel's, the images are painted to harmonize with the format. I find that my bird sculptures have a Seuss-like quality to them. *The Cat in the Hat* is one of Geisel's well known illustrated cats who wears a red and white striped hat. I find that many of my works incorporate similar patterned elements. On the necks and legs of my birds, I often use colored electrical tape to create a pattern of various widths of stripes. The color selection is based upon an overall balance of different hues. Red, white, and black are examples of how colored electrical tape is used to create stripes that help to establish harmony in a piece, as seen in *Cross Stitched Waddler*, (Appendix, 6).

### ***Roy Lichtenstein***

Lichtenstein's art has had a tremendous impact on my own art. His distinct style is recognized in both painting and sculpture. I too am interested in bringing a recognizable style into my works. *Brushstroke* (1996), *House I* (1996), and *Lamp on a Table* (1997) (Appendix, 7) are examples of sculptures where the distinct comic style from his paintings is present. The illusion and manipulation of space is a characteristic in many of his sculptures. The flat metal sculptures that are painted are a contradiction. They have a two-dimensional quality, because they appear flat at first glance, but also portray three-dimensional qualities. For example in *House I*, the corner of the house is inverted and is furthest away from the viewer, yet that corner illusionistically appears to be the closest to the viewer. Like Lichtenstein, I am using an unknown light source in my paintings to alter the perception of space by casting shadows on some colored panels and not others. Another characteristic of Lichtenstein's art that I greatly admire is his ability to create art with a limited color palette. Many works of his were created using only the

primary colors with black and white. In my painting *Yellow Bellied Fly Swatter* (Appendix, 8), I also limited my palette and used yellow, black, white, red, and grey.

### ***Joan Miro***

Miro's interpretation of surrealism has had a strong impact on my painting style. Like his work, my images are painted with bright hues, and the compositions of my work are simplified and free from a lot of clutter. His use of contrasting visual cues, between illusionist and flat space, is another characteristic also found in my paintings. For instance, in Appendix, 4, the shadow cast on the red field of paint, from the bird and plant-like form, give the viewer a sense of real space. Without the shadows, the idea of illusory space could not be communicated in this painting. Miro's *Dog Barking at the Moon* (1926) is an example of using this same device. In his painting, if the unsupported ladder were not present it would be hard to get the sense of spatial division between the sky and earth.

### ***Piet Mondrian***

Mondrian expressed his ideas in art by creating paintings where he used a limited palette to display color and form. *Composition in Blue, Yellow, and Black* (1936) is one example among many paintings in which he used color and line to hold the viewer's attention. By limiting himself to primary colors, values, and two primary line directions Mondrian was able to construct a harmonious composition. He expressed his ideas by limiting his palette to "express his vision of true balance that lies beyond the physical world." (Tansey 1996, 1063) I too compose my compositions so that colors harmonize.

Like Mondrian, I set certain limitations on my own paintings. I use elongated canvases, white vertical and horizontal lines, and different sized colored panels. The purpose this serves is to add color and balance, while allowing the viewer to focus on the images of the birds and other objects.

All these artists were instrumental in helping me produce my current style of art. Ideas of what is real along with formal qualities of space, color, and composition have aided me in my own art. As I continue to produce my art, I am excited to see what artists will influence my own art.

## **Conclusion**

I am excited about the direction and style of my art. I see these bird sculptures as a stepping stone for endless possibilities. As I continue to create more plastic birds, I am anxious to see how the forms have evolved from my first constructions. As I continue to construct more bird sculptures, I experiment with new plastic forms so that each bird I create has its own qualities and personality that make it stand apart from others. My paintings are also evolving in terms of their varying composition and canvas sizes. I continue to play with the idea of space, using my bird forms to create surrealistic paintings. I do this by placing shadows in some areas while not including them in other places.

In my three-dimensional pieces, working in plastics has allowed me to think about the unlimited possibilities of using various objects. My experiences in the MIS program have given me the insight of a practicing artist. The hours of work and preparation that go into creating a body of art, finding a gallery space and creating post cards for an

exhibition have contributed to my thinking of myself as an artist. Thinking outside the box is definitely something I stress to my students and my MIS experience will be a great example to share.

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## Appendix

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Figure 1. *Purple Faced Grieving Crane*, Plastic and Metal, 19"x18"x17", 2006.

Figure 2. *Big Eyed Mid-Atlantic Waddler* (front view), Plastic and Metal, 20"x14"x17", 2006.

Figure 3. *Big Eyed Mid-Atlantic Waddler* (side view), Plastic and Metal, 20"x14"x17", 2006.

Figure 4. *Bird in Yellow and Red Painting*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 15"x30", 2006.

Figure 5. *Long Necks*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 6"x 36", 2006.

Figure 6. *Cross Stitched Waddler*, Plastic and Metal, 30"x19"x16½", 2006.

Figure 7. Roy Lichtenstein, *Lamp on a Table*, 1977.

Figure 8. *Yellow Bellied Fly Swatter*, Plastic and Metal, 19"x 25½"x34", 2006.



Figure 1. *Purple Faced Grieving Crane*, Plastic and Metal, 19"x18"x17", 2006.



Figure 2. *Big Eyed Mid-Atlantic Waddler* (front view), Plastic and Metal, 20"x14"x17", 2006.





Figure 3. *Big Eyed Mid-Atlantic Waddler* (side view), Plastic and Metal, 20"x14"x17", 2006.

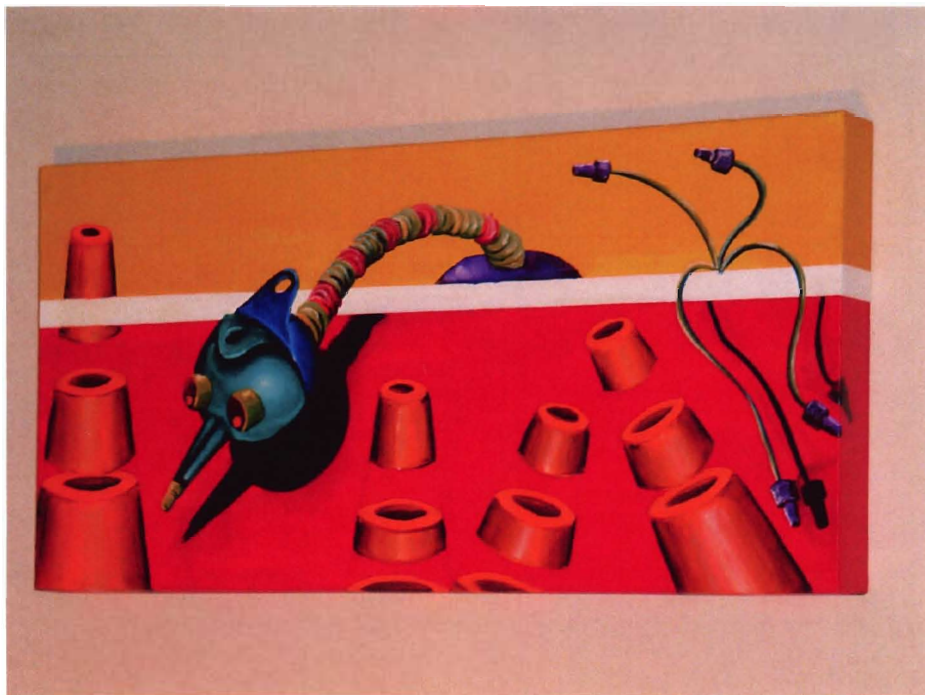


Figure 4. *Bird in Yellow and Red Painting*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 15"x30", 2006.

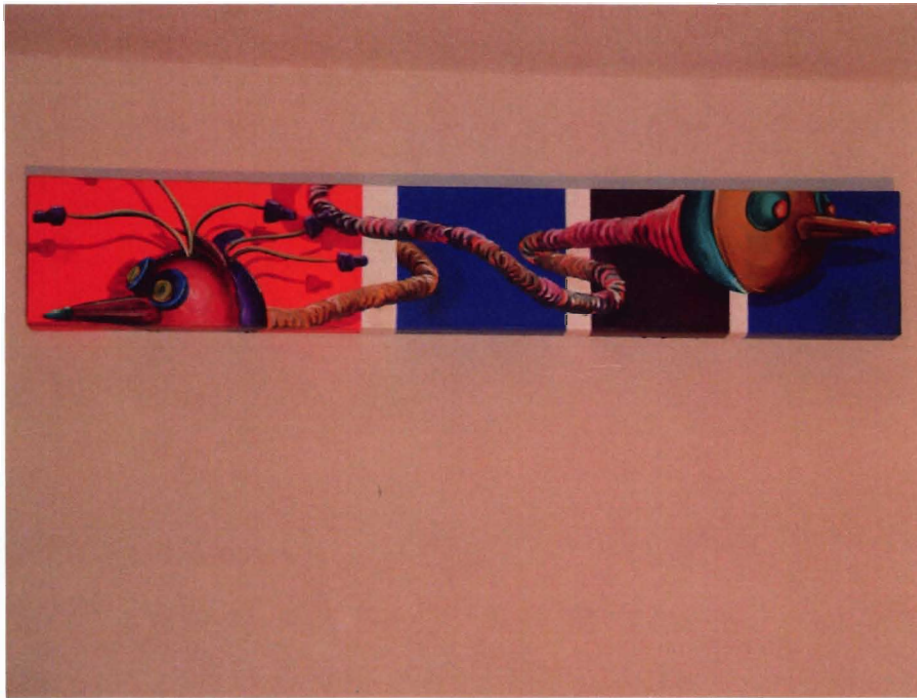


Figure 5. *Long Necks*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 6"x36", 2006.



Figure 6. *Cross Stitched Waddler*, Plastic and Metal, 30"x19"x16 1/2", 2006.



Figure 7. Roy Lichtenstein *Lamp on a Table* (sculpture on far right), 1977.

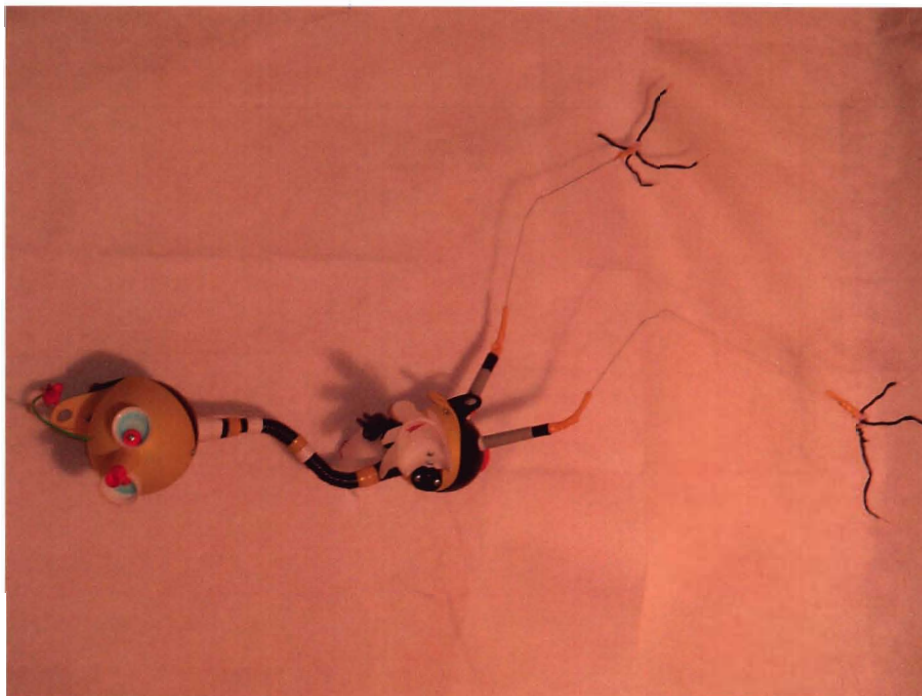


Figure 8. *Yellow Bellied Fly Swatter*, 19"x25 1/2"x34", Plastic and Metal, 2006.

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